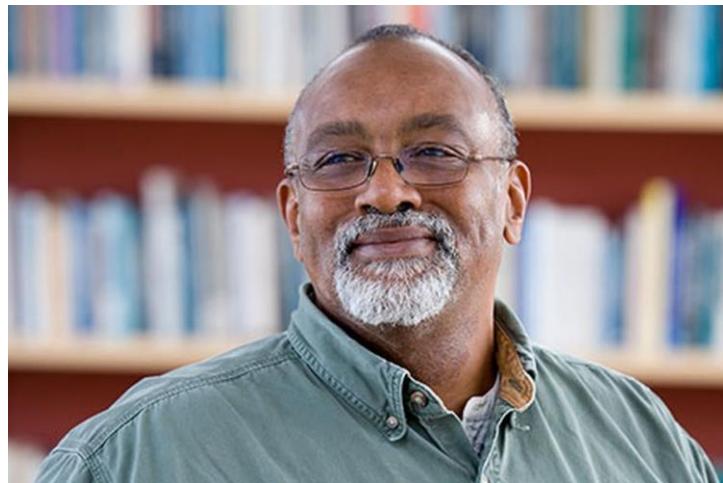


An Ivy League professor on what the campus conversation on race gets wrong

Brown University's Glenn Loury: "We're arguing about labels, about what to call our holidays or which portraits to rearrange on the wall."

By [Sean Illing](mailto:Sean.Illing@seanillingsean.illing@vox.com) Sep 20, 2016, 8:50am EDT



College professors are increasingly liberal — according to a [study cited](#) in the Washington Post earlier this year, the percentage of American professors identifying as “liberal” or “far left” jumped from 42 percent in 1990 to 60 percent in 2014.

Glenn Loury is an outlier in this environment — his politics are difficult to pin down exactly, but they’re probably best described as right of center. An author and professor of economics at Brown University, Loury has written books questioning what he sees as the liberal orthodoxy on race and history, including *One by One From the Inside Out* and *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*.

I spoke with Loury earlier this month about his views on political correctness, the legacy of state-sanctioned racism, and his disagreements with the Atlantic writer Ta-Nehisi Coates. Our conversation, edited for length and clarity, follows.

Sean Illing: "Political correctness" has become a catchall term. Often it's a trite signaling device or it's used to paper over nasty rhetoric.

Occasionally, though, it's a legitimate backlash against a tendency to suppress uncomfortable speech. What do you think about this term and the way it's used?

Glenn Loury: My argument about political correctness is not tendentious or partisan — it's analytical. The core of the argument is that when groups care a lot about maintaining conformity of belief on some matter of critical interest to them, then the hunt for heretics is always ongoing. We're always looking for deviants. The willingness to speak in certain ways can be a sign of deviance, because if speakers know that punishment awaits them for speaking in particular ways, the only speakers willing to take the risks are indeed people who are not reliable on whatever the core belief or value is.

SI: How do you see this playing out on college campuses?

GL: On college campuses, I'm struck by the meta-argumentation. We're not arguing about the questions at hand, i.e., was 1492 the beginning of a catastrophic dehumanizing genocidal appropriation of the planet by European civilization? We're arguing about labels, about what to call our holidays or which portraits to rearrange on the wall.

But the substantive questions are interesting to me. I think the European colonization of the world left a lot of bodies lying around, but I also think it was a necessary stepping stone to the modern globalized civilization that we enjoy. But these aren't conversations we actually have. On the contrary, most of our moral and political inquiries are superficial, and we rarely come to terms with history.

Take affirmative action. We're not supposed to notice that Asians are being turned away in droves from the elite universities. We're not supposed to notice that blacks are included on the basis of some silly argument about diversity. At Brown, we call them "historically underrepresented groups," as if observing the historical underrepresentation constitutes in and of itself an indictment of the institution and not of the groups themselves.

We're 50 years past the civil rights movement and blacks, to get to Harvard or Princeton or Brown, still depend upon being judged by different standards than other people. And people are called "bigots" if they ask questions about this? This is trivial, and it's not engaging real arguments.

SI: Another term that's popular right now is the phrase "structural racism." How do you understand it, and do you think it's a useful category of social analysis?

GL: I don't think it's a useful category of social analysis. It's an epithet, a kind of linguistic scold. I like the structural; I don't like the racism. In the course that I teach on race and inequality, I begin with two books. One of them is a history of Detroit from 1945 to 1970 called The Origins of the Urban Crisis, and the other is a history of the New Deal called When Affirmative Action Was White.

The second book traces the formation of the modern American welfare state in the Roosevelt administrations of the 1930s and '40s under the influence of a segregationist white Southern Democrat plurality in the House and Senate, who were concerned that New Deal programs would undermine the racial domination of the blacks in the South by empowering them. So the welfare state was shaped in various subtle ways in terms of which occupations and groups were impacted, and it disadvantaged blacks in transparent ways.

I'm not denying the role of structure. But the phrase "structural racism" attempts to appropriate our moral intuitions about racial prejudice and racial discrimination in the service of tendentious claims, and that's problematic. We have to look closely at the facts.

My problem with the use of the term "structural racism" is not with the observation that there are struggles that are deeply embedded within the American political economy that have implications for racial inequality. My problem is with the claim that such structural differences are indicted as racist simply because there are racial disparities.

Laws are structurally racist in that respect. Is it structurally racist if I end up with more black people in prison because there are more black robbers? Is that structural racism? It's structure, to be sure, but whether it's racism is an argument that remains to be made.

SI: With respect to the laws, the argument is that they're enforced unequally or that black and white people are sentenced differently for the same crimes — I'm thinking of drug convictions in particular.

And then there are issues around housing: compounding effects of discriminatory housing practices or the social engineering that occurred in urban areas that spawned all sorts of cultural maladies.

GL: I doubt the credibility of the claim that blacks get longer sentences for the same crimes, but that's a deeper argument. On the other things, if you say acts of discrimination in the past (like preventing people from acquiring housing) can have present-day consequences, and if that's what you mean by structural racism, fine. I find that to be an odd way of using the language, but I get what you're saying.

SI: To what factor — or factors — do you attribute the racial disparities in this country? What irks me is the tendency — and this isn't aimed at you in particular — to reduce something as complicated as this to binary narratives: Either white people and slavery are to blame for everything or black people just can't get it together.

How can we have this conversation in a way that doesn't distort a muddy reality for the sake of conceptual, or ideological, clarity?

GL: The answer is here really all of the above, and I understand that's not very satisfying. How much of a present-day disparity is the result of previous discrimination is hard to say. How much of the disparity in the incidents of incarceration can be attributed to those historical influences and to contemporary racist influences, and how much of it is that black people have to get their act together? Well, if you ask a hundred people, you'll get a hundred different responses. Clearly, both of those factors are involved.

I think, ultimately, that we have to get out of the blame game and start getting practical about what interventions will change the facts on the ground. We can talk about housing policy. We can talk about education policy. We can talk about what kind of social safety nets we want in this country. There are big arguments to be had about those things. If we get concrete and specific about the interventions that we're going to get behind that would remedy some of these problems, that seems to me a productive conversation.

SI: In various essays and in his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that slavery is our original sin and a living history from which we can't escape; that the American dream is a kind of phantasm; and that black and white bodies are not, and have never been, equally valued in this country.

In a recent [discussion with John McWhorter](#), you rejected this narrative. [You can find [Coates's response here](#).] What is it that Coates gets wrong in your view?

GL: Coates's narrative, as I understand it, is that the subordination of the black body and the devaluing of African-American humanity is so deeply entrenched in the fiber of American culture and politics that the defining narrative about immigrants and the American dream is, for black people, a lie. Indeed, you'd be foolish to believe it.

I think this is wrong or problematic on two levels. Historically, it's a cherry-picking on behalf of a set of tendentious claims. I don't deny the history of African-American mistreatment or slavery or Jim Crow. I'm as sympathetic as the next person to the goal of teaching our young people what actually happened. But I do deny the causal social-historical connection between the fact of slavery and Jim Crow on the one hand and the plight of contemporary African-American communities on the other.

I deny that because it leaves out a lot of factors, like black wealth. Observers like Coates note racial disparities in wealth. Look, wealth is obviously important because of intergenerational transfers and its capacity to empower people to invest in their own children. I want to say, what about African-American entrepreneurship? Wealth doesn't fall from the sky. Wealth is created and re-created. I want to say, let's look at the economic trajectory of people who come to this country with nothing and succeed. What about initiative? Is it all about history and white people?

So Coates's historical account is a lie. It tells only one part of the story. It erases the responsibility that African Americans have for our own condition. I refuse to accept that we don't have responsibility for our condition. I refuse to accept that we're not free-acting agents able to determine our own future.

Ironically, he imputes more agency and more capacity for judgments to white people in his argumentation than he does to black people. Black people are merely puppets at the end of the string that whites are pulling in his narrative.

SI: I realize part of your concern is that by reducing African Americans to historical props, we rob them of their agency. I take your point. But aren't we all products of history, of antecedent causes over which we had no control? Where you're born, when you're born, to whom you're born — these facts determine our lives to a great degree.

How can we talk about the concrete effects of these historical and material factors without absolving African Americans — or anyone else, for that matter — of their agency? I understand your philosophical position, but I don't want to deny empirical realities simply because accepting them leads us into a philosophical cul-de-sac.

GL: That's a very difficult question. I see the conflict between the heavy hand of history that lies upon all of us. I didn't choose my parents, for example. If I didn't get read to or exposed to a wider vocabulary when my brain was forming, my linguistic acuity might be damaged forever — there's no undoing that. Neither can we undo the stigma of race that comes to us from the 18th and 19th centuries.

We are conditioned by our environment and our genetic inheritance and our social context, and yet there's no possibility for morality unless we presume the possibility of agency. ... We have to assume that people, despite being socially conditioned, nevertheless exercise free will, albeit within constraints.

Then it becomes a practical question whether single-parent families, in which 70 percent of African-American children live, is rightly thought of as a social phenomenon over which we have control if it's thought of as the inheritance of Jim Crow slavery and American racism. Are the structures of African-American social life the derivative consequences of the political and economic history of African Americans, or are they subject to being reshaped and reformed and remade in an image that we will for ourselves and our progeny? The latter is the stance I'm taking. The alternative is a bleak moral landscape for me.